

But he refused to be comforted. (37:35)

Refusing to be comforted is understandable. When a person sustains a tragedy (regardless of the circumstances, the age, or the well-being of the deceased, it is still a tragedy – to someone) it is personal; it is painful; the loss feels like an endless void which cannot be filled with words alone. This is especially true when the mourner had been especially close with the deceased. Accepting comfort may feel like a step towards moving on or letting go – something the mourner refuses to entertain. Others may feel guilt over the death of a loved one, wondering if they could have done something to prevent it. Furthermore, the guilt may be the result of personal conflict in the event the mourner and the deceased had been at odds with one another.

These emotions, however, seem to be incongruent with the *Pele Yoeitz* who writes that, just as it is a *mitzvah* to comfort the bereaved, likewise, it is a *mitzvah* for the mourner to accept *nechamah*, consolation. In a well-known letter, *Horav Chaim Soloveitchik, zl*, writes:

Yeish mitzvah al ha'aveilim l'hisnachem; "It is a *mitzvah* for the mourners to accept *nechamah*." Having said this, we wonder why Yaakov *Avinu* refused to accept consolation over the "loss" of his precious Yosef. The straightforward answer given by *Chazal* is that one can be comforted for someone who is deceased, but not for someone who is still alive. Yaakov had not given up hope that his son, Yosef, would return. His hope was justified when, years later, Yosef embraced his father. This, explains the *Chasam Sofer*, is why we still mourn for Yerushalayim.

We wait for the day when the *Bais HaMikdash* will be rebuilt. Thus, we are not prepared to make closure on the *churban*, destruction, of our *Bais HaMikdash*. One day we will rejoice in its rejuvenation.

A well-known story relates that Napoleon passed by a *shul* on *Tisha B'Av*, our National Day of Mourning. He heard the Jews grieving while reading *Eichah* and *Kinos*. He asked his aide why the Jews were weeping. He was told that their Temple had been destroyed. "How long ago did they lose their Temple?" "More than 1700 years ago." He is reported to have countered, "A nation that mourns for their Temple and their Holy City over 1700 years will one day merit to see its restoration."

Perhaps we may add another observation that might explain why Yaakov refused to be comforted. *Horav Aharon Leib Shteinman, zl*, notes that, when one experiences a moment of great joy, a milestone event, an extraordinary deliverance, he wants celebration to thank the Almighty for his good fortune. In order to make the celebration meaningful, he wants to share it with friends and family. After all, what is a celebration if it is not shared with others? Likewise, when one is mourning, he needs to be comforted by those who feel his loss, who understand his pain, either by someone who himself had experienced such travail or by someone who is simply very sensitive and understanding. When someone who is comforted by a person whose attitude is blasé, who is going through the motions because he feels that is what is expected of him, his *nechamah* will not

be accepted. Yaakov's sons were acutely aware that Yosef was still alive. Thus, Yaakov could not accept their words of consolation. They did not feel the same about Yosef's loss as did Yaakov, because they knew that Yosef was alive.

Comforting someone who is grieving can be particularly impactful when the comforter has sustained a similar painful experience. This shared experience allows the comforter to connect with the mourner in a genuine manner. One who has himself endured a similar trauma can offer words of comfort that have greater meaning to the bereaved. They convey the message, "You are not in this alone." Such people are able to validate and understand the bereaved person's feelings. This can be especially comforting during a time of loss.

At times, trying to help only makes matters worse. In a *shivah* house, where the mourners are themselves searching for meaning, attempting to grapple with everything associated with the death of a close relative, the last thing they need is to have someone say something that is not well-thought-out, only because the comforter feels he must say something. It is best to just sit and wait for the mourner to address you.

At times, the tragedy is so overwhelming that it is beyond words. *Horav Avraham Pam, zl*, heard of a young couple in his neighborhood whose son was tragically taken from them in a car accident. He did not know the mourners, but this did not prevent him from visiting them. He walked into the house. All was quiet. The mourners themselves had hardly been speaking, due to the sudden shock of their tragic loss. The *Rosh Yeshivah* sat down next to the father and motioned for the mother to move closer to her husband. He took the father's hands in his and suddenly began to weep. After a few moments of watching *Rav Pam* weeping uncontrollably, both parents broke down, at first crying quietly and then beginning to wail. This went on for fifteen minutes: *Rav Pam*, the father and mother weeping copiously. Then *Rav Pam* stopped, stood up and said, *HaMakom yinachem eschem*; "The Almighty should comfort you," and left. He achieved true *nechamah* by enabling the parents to express their pain.

No experience of mourning can be compared to any other mourning. A woman who lost her son in a terrorist attack said, "With the death of a husband, you lose your present; with the death of a parent, you lose your past; with the death of a child, you lose your future. None of these can be compared to one another."

A young mother of four lost her husband suddenly. He was a scholar of note who had inspired and changed the lives of hundreds of students. The mother/wife was beyond distraught. Those who came to visit her were in a quandary concerning what to say. The wrong words could add to her pain and devastation. Suddenly, the door opened, and in walked *Horav Moshe Feinstein, zl*. Everyone sat in anticipation to hear what the *gadol hador*, preeminent Torah leader of the generation, would say.

Rav Moshe began to speak of the greatness of the deceased—his erudition, piety and

righteousness. After no more than a few sentences, however, he choked up and began to weep. He wept and tried again to speak, only to break down again. He wept until he sat down and said nothing. Twenty minutes passed in silence, until, with grief written all over his face, he arose, recited *HaMakom* and left. The woman was very moved by the *gadol's* presence. It was not what he said. He showed that he cared and felt her pain. This is what the mourner needs most: to know that we care and will be present for them as long as they need us, because that is what Jewish people do. Knowing that others are present to listen, share in their pain and offer support, can help mourners feel understood and less alone in their journey through the stages of mourning. The sense of empathy reflected by our collective Jewish community can be a powerful source of solace and strength as the mourners navigate their grief.